

Letting go as part of the yoga path....

In a moment of frustration and discomfort about some asana or other, I once asked Nancy Gilgoff “how much of this yoga practice is about surrender?” “Most of it” she casually replied. At the time it raised a smile. Many years later it still does, although my understanding of quite how much there is to let go continues to deepen.

So what did and do I mean by ‘surrender’? Well firstly I think it is important to differentiate between surrender as ‘blind faith’ and surrender as ‘letting go’. Blind faith involves the unquestioning acceptance of an idea or practice or opinion and can often come across as, not so much a letting go, as a ‘taking up’ of a position or ‘attaching’ to an idea no matter what. For example, “I know my knees are screaming but I have faith that if I can just push through the pain, then padmasana and enlightenment are just around the corner.” This is the equivalent of an iron-clad attachment to an intellectual opinion in spite of my own embodied experience. Not much letting go there!

Conversely ‘letting go’ is almost always an acceptance of a more immediate experience, involving a presence that explores without expectation, analysis or judgement. In the context of asana, such an approach almost invariably leads to greater ease, whether we are engaged with the energetic demands of lifts and balances or the more obvious letting go of relaxation in savasana. A bodywork teacher of mine described it beautifully as ‘getting out of one’s own way in order to see what’s happening!’ Using this approach means seeing whether I can move into or towards padmasana without a sense of ‘can’t do because....’, or ‘must do because....’ or even ‘will do, while I think about something else....’ In letting go of these commentaries / stories I attend simply to what is present in my whole system just now (not just my knees, hips, little finger or whatever else is clamouring for my attention). I may or may not sit in padmasana but I will almost certainly sit in greater ease.

Of course this is often not as simple as it sounds. Our minds have a way of layering the stories in a way that makes them difficult to see. I let go the one about having to get to padmasana and substitute one about padmasana or even practice not being important. I let go of that one and an insidious and rather smug one about already having the answer to ‘life, the universe and everything’ takes its place! Just resting in ‘not knowing’ is far from easy it seems. Ajahn Chan once said : ‘letting go, highest practice!’.

About ten years after first asking Nancy that question I sent her this poem :

An open hearted guide once told me –
Wisdom and peace.....its all about surrender.

She forgot to mention
quite how much there is to let go.

Each time a layer falls away,

seems like there's another one below.

But I think I'm finally learning
to meet each one with tenderness

in order to let it go.